The ORIGINAL Buffalo Bill Library. (Aldine Series.)

The outlaw gave a howl of pain as the arrow penetrated his wrist.

No. 294—BUFFALO BILL LIBRARY

Don't Wear a Truss

BROOKS' Appliance is a new scientific discovery with automatic air cushions that draws the broken parts together, and binds them as you would a broken limb. It absolutely holds firmly and comfortably and never slips. Always light and cool, and conforms to every movement of the body without chafing or hurting. We make it to your measure, and send it to you on a strict guarantee of satisfaction or money refunded, and we have put our price so low that anybody, rich or poor, can buy it. Remember, we make it to your order—send it to you—you wear it—and if it doesn't satisfy you, you send it back to us, and we will refund your money. That is the way we do business—always absolutely on the square—and we have sold to thousands of people this way for the past ten years. Remember, we use no salves, no harness, no lies, no fakes. We give you a straight business deal at a reasonable price. Write at once for our Illustrated Booklet.

BROOKS APPLIANCE CO., Ltd.

(1514). 80, Chancery Lane, LONDON, W.C. 2.

The Texas Firebrands.

A Stirring Tale of Buffalo Bill as a Boy Scout-Detective.

CHAPTER 1.

Buffalo Billy on a Detective Trail.

A PAIR of eyes, keen and glittering, looked up from the depth of a bunch-grass hollow into the clear Texan sky. A hawk which had pitched from a rocky pinnacle, some distance away, and made a vain stroke at a jack-rabbit, was now flying slowly towards the hollow, having abandoned pursuit of the elusive jack. On this hawk the glittering eyes were fixed.

Out from the folds of an Indian blanket came a bow. An arrow was hastily plucked from a quiver that lay in the grass, and, fitted to the bow-string, was held in readiness by fingers that did not quiver. The position was slightly shifted, and then, had an observer been peering down from the adjacent slopes, he might have seen that the blanketed form was not that of an Indian. The fingers that held the bow and the bowstring were those of a youth whose face was undeniably white, in spite of the tan which the fervid Texas sun and the rasping Texas wind had imparted.

As the hawk drew nearer the youth rolled over on his back; then the bow-string twanged, and the hawk, pierced by the arrow, fell swiftly to the earth. Casting the blanket aside, the boy ran to the big bird, which was still feebly fluttering, wrung its neck, and began to pull the largest feathers out of its wings and tail. When he had possessed himself of a number of the feathers he secured the arrow and, wrapping himself in the discarded blanket, hastened out of the valley into a neighbouring gorge.

Out from one of his pockets came a small mirror and a box of pigments, which he applied to his face; then he wove the hawk feathers into his abundant hair. Having done this he drew the Indian blanket close about his shoulders and complacently surveyed himself in the glass. He was so pleased with the great change that he chuckled in glee. Rising, he took the mirror from the rock and stowed it away again, with the pigments.

Night was at hand. Already the shadows were creeping from the hills out into the valleys, and Buffalo Billy—as Cody, the famous scout, was called in his youth, for he it was—knew how short is the Texas twilight.

With much care he ascended to the top of one of the highest peaks in the vicinity and looked out across a rough and hilly country. To the southward flowed the Rio Grande, and beyond it were the plains and mountains of Mexico. But not towards these did the young scout-detective turn his gaze. It settled on a thin, blue column of smoke that came from a narrow defile not a mile from his point of observation.

"There yet!" he muttered.

By a roundabout way he descended, and at once set off afoot for the camp, whose smoke he had seen arising from the defile. Darkness lay heavily all about before he gained the place. The camp-fire had been kicked asunder, as if through a fear that its light might bring foes, and the sounds and movements seemed to indicate that camp was about to be broken. Feathered headdresses were to be seen nodding here and there by the light that still came from the embers, and Indian-like forms flitted about. But these were not Indians, as Billy well knew, even before he heard them talking in unmistakable English. He had sighted them some hours before—had seen that they were white men disguised as Indians; and, knowing that they were up to some mischief, he had disguised himself as an

Indian and was now in their camp to learn what they contemplated.

This daring act was fraught with the gravest peril to our hero, as he knew full well. These men probably were outlaws, who would not hesitate to shoot any spy caught sneaking in or around their camp. But all the same Buffalo Billy crept into the shadow of a rock and there waited and listened. It was not a large party—only six or eight men, all in Indian guise.

"If Brace Benson's at home, he'll very likely make a fight!" he heard one of the villains declare.

"Correct you air. Benson's said to be a fighter."

The young scout's heart gave a great thump. He did not know Brace Benson personally, but knew of him—knew where he lived, and that he was said to be a cattleman and a newcomer in that section. There could be no doubt, apparently, that Benson's house was to be attacked and raided by these outlaws in the guise of Indians.

The men drew further away, still talking, at which Billy rose from his position behind the rock that he might get nearer and hear the remainder of what was being said. Almost instantly he was seen. A man turned towards him from a point near the fire, and Billy thought he had been recognised. But the man's question reassured him:

"About ready, Jack?"

"Be ready in 'nuther minute!" Billy mumbled, shambling off, feeling every moment that his walk would betray him if his voice did not.

The questioner turned in another direction, apparently satisfied, and the boy scout-detective sank down in the shadows, where he remained unseen and unsuspected, and a few minutes later the painted and feathered white men rode out of the defile.

Buffalo Billy listened to the soft beat of the hoofs of the unshod ponies on the grass as the horsemen rode away, then he ran as rapidly as he could, taking a course at right angles. Finally he reached an enclosed, rocky space, through which a stream once had flowed, and pushing aside some bushes at the upper end of the enclosure a cavity was disclosed into which he crawled. The bushes swung into place behind him, completely concealing the opening. Straight ahead went the young scout, turning to the right and then to the left. Then he stopped, struck a match, and ignited the wick of a lamp that hung from the side of the wall.

The lamp-light revealed the interior, showing the place to be a cavern fitted up rudely as a place of abode. There was a bed of skins in the corner, a rough table and some chairs, a sort of fireplace, and a number of pegs ranged along the walls. In addition, at one side, were a number of shelves made from boxes.

But Buffalo Billy did not stop in the cavern. He hurried through another opening and came out in a grassy, enclosed space, where his horse was picketed and grazing. Without removing his Indian disguise he saddled and bridled the horse, and was soon after out on the prairie, riding at a rapid gait in the direction of Brace Benson's. For more than an hour he rode hard and confidently; then he hesitatingly drew rein.

"I've gone astray!" he gasped.

He stared at the rocks about him. The ground was unfamiliar.

"I believe I'm too far south," he muttered. "Yes, I must be."

With this he turned towards the north-west and rode on again, but only to draw rein once more when less than a mile had been gone over. He was puzzled, and the more he tried to set himself right the more bewildered he grew. Then he heard hoof-beats. A body of men was approaching. There was a considerable patch of mesquite at hand, into which the young scout-detective crowded his horse, and then sat bolt upright, listening. He was soon convinced that the horsemen were coming straight towards him. They were not far away, but, because of the mesquite and the darkness, he could not see them.

Bending forward in the saddle, Buffalo Billy touched his horse on the nose, rubbing his hand up and down in a soothing way to keep the beast quiet. He feared it might neigh and betray him. Then the voices of the men came

to him, and he recognised them as those of the disguised outlaws who were hurrying to Benson's. He bent lower in the saddle and remained as motionless as the bushes.

The bandits came trotting by, some of them almost within reaching distance; and Billy, growing bolder, drew his horse in at their heels and joined them without attracting attention. For almost another hour he rode on in that manner, his Indian blanket a complete protection from recognition. Then Benson's was reached. The house stood at the edge of a bunch of mesquite trees, and looked lonely and deserted. But the outlaws were not willing to approach it. They seemed to think it was filled with defenders, who were likely to be wide awake. So they began to ride in a circle about it, Indian fashion, to fire rifles at it, and to yell frightfully. Still the house remained silent. They drew together for a consultation, and Billy crowded close in with them to hear what was said.

"Brace Benson may be at home. He's a sly dog, you know, but we must rout him out."

Thus spoke the leader, who thereupon gave orders that burning arrows should be shot at the roof. The young scout drew back as the arrows began to fly, for the light they cast he feared might reveal him. Three arrows stuck in the dry roof, which quickly began to burn. Another arrow struck the house at the side of a window, and Buffalo Billy, who was looking at the house at the moment, was sure he saw the terrified face of a girl. The arrow did not stick, but dropped to the ground, and the face was not seen again. Other burning arrows had found lodgment, and soon the whole roof was a mass of flame. Still no one came out of the house.

Buffalo Billy could endure it no longer. The outlaws were again circling and yelling. Taking advantage of this, the boy spy boldly rode towards the house, pulling the blanket close about his face. But he did not reach the window. He heard a harsh voice at his elbow; then felt himself jerked rudely backward out of the saddle. He struck the ground heavily, and before he could quite get into his head what had happened to him two of the painted outlaws were standing above him.

"Who are you? Played it pretty fine, eh?"

Further effort at concealment was useless. Billy sat up and looked his captors in the face.

"There is a girl in the house. Get her out. That's what I meant to do!" he said.

Other outlaws had ridden up.

"Kick in the door!" the leader called. "We'll find out if what he says is true. Tie him there, some of you."

All the while Buffalo Billy kept his eyes on the door through which the men had gone.

"No girl in here!" was called out. "That was a blamed lie!"

The leader leaped down and ran into the house. The fire was spreading and haste was necessary. He came out, accompanied by some men, who dragged with them a box. They wrenched it open, and Billy saw that it held a great quantity of silver coin.

"Now, tell me who you are!" the leader asked, advancing towards him fiercely.

He did not understand how the lad had managed to join his party, and he had not yet heard of Bill Cody.

"Call me Buffalo Billy, if you like."

"Where did you come from?"

"You were riding along and I joined you. That's all. You were playing Indian, and so was I. I thought maybe we might be friends."

The man looked him closely in the face by the light of the burning house.

"You're a keen one, and I guess you're lying."

"It might be of benefit to both of us if you'd let me join you."

"I'll let you join the boys that have gone over the divide! You'll be safer there and happier!"

There was a wolfish gleam in the outlaw's eyes which told Billy that he could expect no mercy.

The leader then turned away and began to give orders for the distribution of the coin, and sent others into the house to renew the search. But no other treasure boxes could be found. It seemed possible the searching had

been delayed too long, for the heat was now intense and there was danger that the roof might fall in.

When convinced that nothing but peril could come of further delay the leader gave an order and the entire party moved away towards the northwest, carrying Buffalo Billy with them. He was tied to his own horse, which was attached to that of the outlaw chief, and his hands were bound behind his back. He knew from the talk that they feared him because of the knowledge he had obtained, and that they intended to shoot or hang him, and so put him beyond the power of harming them.

The night continued dark, and the captive spy began to plan a way of escape. Softly he began to pull and tug at the cords that held his hands, and finally had the satisfaction of feeling them give under the strain. The knots slipped a little, and he succeeded, after much painful effort, in drawing the cord off his wrists. He kept his hands behind his back, however, that the attention of his captors might not be drawn to them. When sure he was still unsuspected Billy reached into an inner pocket and got out a small knife. With this he cut the rope that held him to the horse; then he again sat erect, with his hands behind him, biding his time.

Presently, while brushing through a clump of mesquite, the young scout found opportunity to slide softly to the ground, where he lay until the horsemen had passed on; then he leaped up and stood listening. Scarcely were the men clear of the mesquite when Billy's escape was discovered. A loud outcry resulted, and the lad acted promptly. He put his fingers to his lips and blew a shrill blast. A neigh and the sound of hoofs instantly followed. Billy's well-trained horse, hearing the call, had broken from the leader and now raced back to him, and a moment later the daring young scout was on its back and flying from danger.

The cries grew louder and revolvers began to crack as the outlaws took in the situation. A lively chase resulted, but Buffalo Billy's horse was fleet-footed, and was soon able to distance pursuit.

CHAPTER 2.

Scenting a Mystery.—Arrested.

Buffalo Billy was back in the cavern. From one of the shelves he took a coat, restoring to the shelf the blanket he had worn. Then he removed the feathers from his hair and the paint from his hands, setting up the mirror in front of him to make sure the work was properly done. Having got rid of his Indian disguise, he brought out his horse, mounted, and again rode in the direction of Brace Benson's. The time was broad day.

For three hours he rode hard, then drew in on the bridle at the top of a high knoll and stared across the intervening valley. All that remained of Benson's house was a heap of smoking and glowing embers. What he stared at, though, was a young woman, who was poking with a long pole into the embers and frenziedly sweeping the ashes aside with a shovel, as if she sought something.

Her movements gave Buffalo Billy a queer thrill that had in it a touch of horror. The thought flashed across him that she was searching for the burned remains of her uncle, for he suspected she was Brace Benson's niece. He was sure she was the girl he had seen at the window. He approached the house by a roundabout way, tied his horse to a small tree, and then, on foot, went forward, concealing himself from the girl's observation by keeping a fringe of mesquite bushes between himself and her. The fringe of mesquite came close up to the house.

The young scout-detective was about to step out and reveal himself when he saw that which caused him to catch his breath and remain silent. She had cleared away a small area at one corner with the shovel, and had been digging in the ground at that point. Now he saw her stoop and drag out of the ground a box so heavy that her strength was hardly equal to the task. She tugged and strained at the load, resting now and then. Presently, having drawn the box out of its pit, she lifted the lid, as if to inspect its contents and make sure they were uninjured by the fire.

These contents were plainly visible to the staring eyes of Buffalo Billy. The box contained a great quantity of gold and silver coin. The girl heard his involuntary movement, and, closing the lid of the box with a snap, stared into the mesquite. At this the lad showed himself, lifting his hat with a low bow as he approached the fire.

"I hope I am not intruding," he apologised. "I saw the fire, and thought I might be of service. Can I help you in any way? Is Mr.——"

He hesitated, remembering he had fancied she might be poking in the ashes for Brace Benson's remains. His keen eyes noted the shiver that shook her.

"My uncle is gone," she said. "He was forced to leave me alone yesterday. A band of Indians came last night and set the house afire."

"And you?"

"Uncle had prepared for something of the kind. There is a well-like opening in the house, or was, and a tunnel leads from it out yonder. When they surrounded the house and began to yell I ran into that tunnel, just as Mr. Benson—my uncle—had told me to do. But, oh! it was dreadful! It was terrible! I thought I should die in there. And it was almost like death. They set the house afire, and the smoke and the heat came to the tunnel in a way that almost suffocated me. I could hardly breathe! If the tunnel had not been a long one—it reaches away out there—with a circular place at the end, I am sure I should have died. Then they went away, and I pushed aside the board, which you may see out there in the grass, and looked around. I did not do this, however, until I was sure they were gone."

"Do you mind my looking at the place?" questioned Billy, glancing towards the indicated board.

"Not at all," she said, and set out to accompany him.

The board had been set in the ground like the cover of a coal-hole or well, with earth strewn above it, so that it had not been visible.

A feeling of mystery was growing on the young scout. Was this hole, with the tunnel leading to it from the house, the provision of a wise man guarding against the perils of the future, or was it suggestive of the deceit of crime? Had it any connection with the gold and silver coin in that box? What was the meaning of that gold and silver coin anyway? Was it counterfeit or genuine? He felt sure that Lizzie Benson, the handsome niece of Brace Benson, was as honest a young woman as there was in the State.

"You wouldn't mind if I dropped down into that hole and took a look at it?" he asked somewhat timidly.

"Not at all!" she assured him.

But Billy discovered nothing of importance when he had dropped into the hole. There were some blankets in it, and signs of occupancy, but that was all. He climbed out and walked with the girl back to the fire. She expressed fears as to the safety of her uncle, and asked if he would not ride in search of him.

"And you say he is where?"

"He said he was going to John Tanner's, ten miles down the river."

Buffalo Billy knew the location of Tanner's Ranch, and he knew well, too, that John Tanner was suspected of various shady transactions.

"I'll be glad to ride down there for you. But won't you be afraid to stay here alone?" he asked.

"Not at all," she asserted.

"But those men—those Indians may come back."

"If they do I'll run into the tunnel. But they'll not come back, for they think there's nothing to come back for."

Buffalo Billy thought he saw her glance anxiously towards the box. He would have been pleased to remain longer, but he brought up his horse, and, bidding her good-bye, rode down the river towards Tanner's Ranch.

* * * * *

"By the great stone nose of my——"

Buffalo Billy, clattering along over the short mesquite grass, drew so hard on the rein that he fairly threw his horse on its haunches. Around him, crowding forward out of bushes, rode a dozen soldiers, hemming him in.

"Surrender!" called out a harsh voice, and the officer in charge came towards him swinging a sword.

"You are making a mighty big mistake," the lad grumbled, letting the reins drop on his horse's neck and offering no resistance. "I'm not what you think me. I'm only an honest chap, on my way to a ranch down the river."

"You can tell that to the captain, if you want to. I don't believe it. You're one of Colino's scoundrels. They've been raiding through here, and burned a ranch house last night."

"I've just come from that ranch house," Billy stated. "It was Brace Benson's house, and I was riding to Tanner's Ranch at the request of Benson's niece."

He had listened closely to the voice of the officer with the sword, whom he soon afterwards heard addressed as Lieutenant Crosscut, with the unpleasant feeling growing on him that he had heard that voice in the camp of the disguised white men when they were setting out to destroy Benson's house.

Buffalo Billy related just what he had seen, and the soldiers gave earnest heed to his story, which he made as full as possible, acquainting them with all the facts that had come into his possession.

"You can tell that to the captain," Lieutenant Crosscut again sneered when the young scout-detective concluded.

"You're not going to hold me?" Billy gasped.

"We didn't capture you just for fun. Of course we will hold you."

"But Brace Benson! And the girl up there at the burned house!"

"She'll be looked after," said Crosscut. "And now, what can you tell us about Juan Colino?"

Buffalo Billy was not able to tell them anything especially interesting concerning Juan Colino more than they knew. All were acquainted with the same facts: Juan Colino was known far and near on the Rio Grande as Colino the Firebrand. He had at his heels a band of rough-riders, who were cutthroats and thieves, and he had made himself so detested and notorious that he was hunted by American and Mexican soldiers alike, and chased to and fro, from one side of the border to the other, as if he and his men were coyotes, to be run down and destroyed without mercy.

"I'm no more one of Juan Colino's men than you are," Billy asserted.

"Of course, we wouldn't expect you to confess it. We have been after Colino's men, and we have pretty good reason to believe that you are one of them. So you'll go along with us, without any nonsense, or we'll clap you in irons."

"How long shall I be detained?" Billy questioned, striving to control his rage. "Benson must be notified at Tanner's Ranch of what's happened."

"Move along there, will you?" Crosscut commanded. "We'll attend to that matter. I'm sure you're lying, but we'll look into it."

The blood of Buffalo Billy began fairly to boil. But he saw how foolish it would be to attempt any resistance, or to hurl a counter taunt at the sneering lieutenant, and so he suffered himself to be borne along in company of the soldiers without further protest.

The distance to be travelled was further than the young scout anticipated. Arriving at the military headquarters, Billy was conducted before Captain Marchmont, the commander, who was seated in a big tent pitched near the centre of the camp, and there Crosscut made his accusations. The lad denied them earnestly, and appealed to Marchmont to be released.

Marchmont was a different sort of man from Crosscut, but he was inclined to believe Crosscut's story and to disbelieve Billy's. The captain had brought his men into that particular locality because he had information tending to make him think the headquarters of Colino the Firebrand was somewhere in the surrounding hills.

"I'm sorry we can't let you go," he said when he had patiently heard Billy and the lieutenant through. "You hardly look like one of Colino's men, though some of them are said to be beardless boys. Still, I'll have to hold you until the thing can be further investigated."

Buffalo Billy began to protest, but it availed him nothing, and he was led away to a guard tent, where he was confined.

CHAPTER 3.

Rio Grande Rob. — A Startling Discovery.—Colino the Firebrand.

Buffalo Billy passed a sleepless night, feeling anxious as to what would be the outcome of his arrest. There was a way, he knew, by which he might establish his innocence, but for certain reasons he did not wish to resort to it. Finally, he lay down on the ground. He was tired, but he did not desire to sleep. The measured steps of the guard, walking up and down in front of the tent, were not by any means reassuring or soothing.

The young captive had not lain there long when his quick ear detected a singular sound. The noise did not draw the attention of the guard. Within and without the tent darkness reigned. Though he could see nothing, he was satisfied that a human form had slipped through the tent and was crouching not a yard from him. Then came the whispered words:

"You here, Buffalo Billy?"

The voice was familiar. It was that of Billy's pard, Rio Grande Rob—or Bob Roundtree.

"What are you doing here, Bob?" Billy whispered back.

"Come for you."

"What if I don't want to go?"

"You're goin' to come with me. We'll argify about it after you git out o' hyar. Now, let's slide!"

Buffalo Billy had had many chances to test the wisdom of Rio Grande Rob, and, though he was loth to run from these enemies—for such an act would apparently brand him with guilt—he permitted Roundtree to lead him through the slit in the canvas of the tent. Once outside they flattened themselves on the ground and slipped away through the darkness like lizards, finding little difficulty in evading the sentries.

"Now you will explain, please," said Billy when they were beyond earshot of the camp and reasonably safe. "How did you know where I was?"

"I wasn't a thousand yards away from you when you were captured. You and the soldiers rode right by me, and I heard you and that Lieutenant Crosscut talkin'. I know'd somethin' was crooked, and I follered you up as fast as I knew how, not knowin' jest what I could do, but bound to be ready to help you if the chance came! Then you was put in that tent. I seen you go in there, and I seen Crosscut, as they calls him, go into his tent; and to-night I sneaked up and puts my head under Crosscut's tent. He and another feller soon began to talk about you, and Crosscut says: 'We've got that there young chap dead to rights, and he don't never git out o' this place alive!' And the way he gritted his teeth an' looked black in the face convinced me that he meant it. And so I says to myself: 'That there young pard o' mine ain't agoin' fer to stay in that there tent any longer than I kin help him, he hain't!' And so I done it, and hyar we aire!"

"And they'll think I'm one of Colino's men now, sure," Billy objected.

"Let 'em think! So long as you're not one of Colino's men and you keep out of their clutches their ideas hain't agoin' to hurt you."

The young scout-detective was not sure that Roundtree had acted wisely in releasing him from the tent, yet he was not inclined to grumble. He and Bob Roundtree were on the Rio Grande border at that time looking for certain criminals, and posing as cattlemen and prospective purchasers, thus giving them an excuse for visiting various ranches. It was pretty certain that a great amount of spurious coin was being manufactured in that section. Some thought it the work of Colino's men, while others believed that some unsuspected ranchman was the guilty party. It was the business of Buffalo Billy and Bob Roundtree to learn the truth and to bring the criminal or criminals to speedy justice. Billy had been especially commissioned and sent there as a member of the Secret Service force, and Bob Roundtree was his faithful assistant.

The lad now followed Roundtree, who struck out into the prairie straight away from the camp, and they soon found Billy's horse, which Rob had picketed there in readiness for an escape.

Billy stooped and discovered that the feet of the horse had been muffled in sacks that Roundtree had taken from the camp.

"We'll take turns at riding," said the young scout, swinging into the saddle. "Come along. You're longer-legged and the best walker. I'm going to Brace Benson's. I want to see what's become of that girl."

Then, as they passed on out from the valley seeking to hide their trail, Buffalo Billy acquainted Bob Roundtree with the many things that had happened since they had last met. The story of the box of coin greatly interested Roundtree.

"I'll bet it was counterfeit!" he ejaculated. "Perhaps Brace Benson is the very king bee we're after! And that girl——"

"I'm sure she's not guilty," his young pard interposed.

"Mebbe not!" Roundtree admitted.

But when, after the coming of daylight, they reached the site of Brace Benson's home it began to seem that Roundtree's suspicions might be correct after all, and the girl not so innocent as Billy had fancied. Lizzie Benson, and the box with the coin, were both gone.

Buffalo Billy was undeniably puzzled, and he began an immediate examination of the ashes and cinders, as well as a survey of the surroundings, in an effort to get at the facts. It was likely, he thought, that Brace Benson had returned from Tanner's Ranch and had gone away with the girl and the money. Was it counterfeit money, though? If not, where had such a quantity of coin come from?

Brace Benson was said to be comparatively a newcomer in the country, with only a few cattle and without much acquaintance or standing among the cattlemen of the Rio Grande. Therefore, under all the circumstances, it seemed probable that Benson was a counterfeiter or in league with counterfeiters.

"It was not the work of Colino the Firebrand," the young scout-detective declared to his pard when he had closely scrutinised the hoof-prints in the surrounding grass. "I have been thinking that Colino's men were the chaps that burned this house, but they weren't. One would think they were Indians, but I know that they were not."

"Who then?" questioned Roundtree.

"That's for us to find out! You remember what I said to you about my thinking Crosscut's voice was like the voice of one of the white men disguised as Indians?"

"Yes!"

"Do you suppose he could have been in both places—been the leader of those pretended Indians and of the soldiers, too?"

"I once knowed a feller that asked so many questions that he fogged his brain and never got over it," Roundtree observed in a way that was most unsatisfactory. "I tell you I don't know nothin', and that's the truth."

With this observation Bob Roundtree began to poke his toes into the ashes at the point where the coin-box had been found. He was hoping he might come on some of the coins and so be able to tell if the money was counterfeit or genuine.

"What are these tracks?" Billy suddenly called out. "Here are the tracks of a man and the tracks of a girl."

Roundtree hurried to his young pard's side and assisted him in an inspection of the trail. It seemed to settle the point that Benson had returned and accompanied the girl from the ruins, and with this as a conclusion they poked again among the ashes until they came to the well-like aperture through which the girl had descended into the tunnel when the house was attacked.

With their curiosity increased they descended into the tunnel, which was littered with charred wood and ashes, and made their way to the point where Lizzie Benson had concealed herself in terror when the house was on fire and the supposed Indians were howling around it. They found the place still warm, almost stifling, though the opened hole on the prairie let in the light and the air. Still, it was so dark that Roundtree struck a match now and then to assist him in the search. They went about, kicking into the dirt and stabbing their knives into the walls, in the hope that another store of coin

might be found, or at least something that would throw more light on the mystery of the box.

At length Buffalo Billy's foot turned up a silver half-dollar.

"It's counterfeit!" he cried as he held it beneath the match that Roundtree had lighted.

"Not a doubt of it!" Roundtree agreed after a close scrutiny. "And that shows, don't it, that Brace Benson is a counterfeiter, and that the girl is a counterfeiter, too?"

The young scout was silent. He could not combat this reasoning.

"It's a great pity," Roundtree continued, "that you didn't hang to that box, or at least make her let you see the stuff in it. But I know 'twas counterfeit, jist the same!"

Buffalo Billy pocketed the counterfeit half-dollar, and they renewed the search, leaving nothing unexamined.

Presently Billy thrust his foot into a bundle of old clothes and fell back with a scared outcry. And no wonder. His foot had touched a human form. The clothes were tossed aside, and a man sprang up, drawing a revolver from his hip-pocket.

Buffalo Billy dropped back and faced him, Roundtree drawing his pistol and levelling it with remarkable celerity.

"Who are you?" the young scout demanded. "What are you doing here, and why were you hiding?"

"Take it easy, youngster," came in the cool voice of the stranger. "Strikes me I might ask what you are doing here."

"Answer my question!" Billy commanded, while Bob Roundtree nervously fingered the big pistol.

"I suppose I'll have to stand your imperdence, which I wouldn't do under any other circumstances," the fellow growled. "My story is straight enough. I'm a cowboy, and I come hyar to see Brace Benson. I found his house burned, and then, hearin' you comin', an' not knowin' jes' how to take ye, I crept in hyar, and then, when ye follered me, I slipped under them old clothes."

An evil, evasive look rested on his face as he made this statement, showing that he was not speaking truthfully.

"You are lyin', you dog!" declared Bob Roundtree with more force than politeness.

Hardly had the words left Roundtree's lips when the man flew at him, impelled by uncontrollable rage.

"No, you don't!" exclaimed Bob, dropping the big revolver and clutching the fellow by the throat.

Roundtree was tall and powerful, a typical Texan, and he bent the man backward against the wall with choking fingers, at the same time hissing:

"I've a notion to squeeze your life out for that! And I'll do it, too, now, if you don't tell the truth! You're no cowboy. What's your name, eh?"

"My name is Sam Adair," the fellow whined submissively; "and I come hyar jest as I told ye. That's the truth, and if you kill me I can't say nothin' else."

"Better let him go, hadn't we?" questioned Buffalo Billy.

"I don't know as we can do anything else," Roundtree grumbled. "Wish we could. I feel it in my bones, though, that we'll be sorry we didn't hold him, or kill him!"

"I see you don't believe me. I'm sorry that you don't! But I've done nothing, and I don't know what you mean by holding me," said the man.

His manner had entirely changed. It bordered on the cringing.

"We'll let you go," said Roundtree with an air of superior condescension.

Sam Adair, anxious to get away, thereupon leaped out of the hole and into the shelter of the mesquite.

Among the bushes, less than a half-mile from the site of Benson's house, the man calling himself Sam Adair had a horse hitched, which he mounted and galloped furiously away.

"You'll see me again," he threatened, shaking his fist. "And you'll tremble when you know who I am. Colino the Firebrand don't take such insults without striking back."

If Buffalo Billy and his pard had had the least idea that the man whom they had in their power was the notorious leader of the Firebrands they certainly would not have let him go.

Colino did not ride a mile till he altered his course, taking advantage of a rocky slope as he did so, and rode in

the direction of a range of low hills. Again and again he changed his path, and finally clattered with much noise through a kind of tunnel, and into a valley that was small and ringed in by rocky walls.

"Halt! Halt!" rang out sharply, accompanied by the clicking of a rifle-lock.

A wolfish smile came to the face of Juan Colino. He drew in his horse with a jerk and turned to the speaker, who was emerging from his post behind a boulder.

"Ever watchful, my good David!" Colino pleasedly commented. "Of course, though, the way I came, you couldn't help hearing me. See that you're always as ready."

"Ay, that I will. What news?"

He was a tattered scoundrel, with a leering face that showed the influence of drink. His ragged condition was emphasised by the fine rifle he held in his hands. It was a Winchester of the latest pattern, and its polished barrel glittered like silver.

"No news," replied the chief. "Is all well in the camp?"

"All well!" replied the sentry.

Then Colino trotted on, turning almost immediately an angle that brought into view a number of tents, some horses, two or three camp-fires, and a dozen men. The latter had heard him coming and were ready to greet him, swarming forward with words of welcome.

Colino dismounted, giving his horse in charge of one of the men, and entered one of the houses, whither he was followed by his lieutenants. His brow darkened as he looked into the faces of his officers after the door had closed behind him.

"There are two men I want the Rough Riders to capture!" he declared harshly and gratingly. "They are now at Benson's—or where Benson's house was—and I want them captured and brought here. Then I will teach them a lesson they will never forget!"

Having said this much, he went into details and told of his treatment at the hands of Buffalo Billy and Rio Grande Rob, and fairly writhed under the bitter memory.

CHAPTER 4.

A Capture and an Escape.

"A HANDY little hole back hyar!"

The fringe of bushes was drawn aside and a frowsy head was thrust into Buffalo Billy's cave-house. Needless to say, the young scout-detective was away.

"'Twouldn't be a purty place to git trapped in, though."

The head was drawn back and its owner closely surveyed the surrounding country, as he had already done a dozen times.

"It's me that wants to ketch the boy, not him ketch me," he added.

The teeth were shown in a grin. Then the man, satisfied the way was clear, crept into the cavern and stared about him. He was one of Colino's Firebrands, anxious to do Colino's bidding and gain the favour of his redoubtable chief. He had been squatting on the adjacent hillside late that afternoon when by chance he saw Buffalo Billy leave the cavern, and recalling the words uttered by his chief he reflected that if he could capture this boy it would be the biggest kind of a feather in his hat.

Some jerked venison was on the wall and some crackers in a box. There was also water in a black jug. He ate greedily of the crackers and venison, swallowed a quantity of the water, and then reclined lazily on a couch of skins. The man felt so comfortable that he began to be drowsy and to fear he might fall asleep. He was thinking of changing his position when he heard the clatter of a horse's feet. The sounds electrified him. All the laziness at once vanished. Clutching a point of rocks just above his head, he swung up out of sight on to a shelf that here ran along the side of the cave. He found himself in the young scout's storehouse, and saw about him more blankets and skins and a box or two that might have contained food supplies.

Buffalo Billy—for he it was the man heard approaching—a few moments later entered the retreat.

It was growing dark in the cave, and Buffalo Billy struck a match and lit the rude lamp that swung against the wall.

By its light he glanced about, thinking of his pard, when his gaze fell on a few splashes of water on the floor which the intruder had let fall from the jug. He saw some cracker crumbs, too, and he started with alarm.

The outlaw on the shelf saw the involuntary movement, and, knowing discovery was inevitable, grew desperately bold. The lad stood just beneath him, within reach of his long arms. Reaching down, he softly pulled the revolvers from Billy's belt. Billy felt the movement and turned quickly, but not so quickly that the removal of the weapons was prevented. He felt he was trapped.

"Take it easy, pardner!" the outlaw grinned. "I jest dropped into your hotel hyar a while ago. You keep good chuck and you keep good beds. Now, I hopes you'll not spile my good opinion of you by actin' ugly. You might's well throw up yer hands fu'st as last!"

"You've got the drop on me," the young scout admitted. "I always make it a rule to agree with the man who has that. So if you'll be kind enough to tell me what you want——"

"Well, you're goin' with me. Colino wants to see you."

"You're one of Colino's men, eh?"

"That's too much like callin' hard names, now, ain't it?" with a leering grin. "Are you ready to go 'long wi' me?"

As he asked the question he clicked one of the revolvers menacingly, keeping the lad covered by it.

Buffalo Billy was doing some rapid thinking.

"Yes, I'll go with you," he said. "Not because I want to, but because I have to."

"Correct you aire."

"First let me get some more money out of this box. Colino likes money, I know, and maybe he'll treat me better if I take him a present."

The man's eyes kindled avariciously. The box was at Billy's feet, and before the outlaw could make any reply the box was open and the young scout was feeling in it.

"No tricks, now," growled the man.

"You've got me covered, haven't you?"

"Jest the same, no tricks, mind ye!"

He lifted the revolver threateningly, holding it up in his right hand. The next moment a bowstring twanged, and the outlaw gave a howl of pain and astonishment. Buffalo Billy had seized his Indian bow and arrow, that lay in the box, and had sent the arrow through the outlaw's wrist.

The revolver dropped with a clatter to the rocks and was exploded, and another yell came from the outlaw. His hand remained uplifted, and the lad saw that the arrow-head had gone through it, and, clinging fast to an interstice of the rocks, held the hand there. The exploding revolver rolled at Billy's feet. Then the tables were turned.

"I ought to shoot you down like a dog!"

Buffalo Billy thrust the muzzle of the pistol against the man's breast, as if tempted to send a ball whizzing through his body. By a great effort the man tore his hand loose; and then, overpowered by the touch of the cold steel, he rolled, in a gasping and bewildered heap, to the ground. Before he could recover or get out another weapon the lad had the loop of a strong rope about his wrists and had him bound fast. He pulled the outlaw to a sitting posture, took down the lamp, and flashed it in his face.

"If Colino is as much of a scoundrel as you look to be, I don't wonder that he's gained a hard name. Now, tell me where he is and when you saw him last."

The man, with his hands tied, cowered against a rock. Billy had taken from him every weapon that could be found.

"Speak up!" the young scout commanded.

For answer the man lifted his head, seemed to listen intently for a moment, and then uttered the peculiar "chr—r" of the prairie-dog owl. Buffalo Billy had himself heard nothing, but now there came a similar "chr—r" out of the darkness. The outlaw drew himself up to send forth another call when the lad smote him furiously in the mouth.

"Keep your tongue quiet, will you? Do that again, and I'll shoot you!" he threatened.

The man fell backward as Billy struck him, and then cowered, fearing a repeti-

tion of the blow. However, before the young scout could do more dark forms sprang through the opening and revolver muzzles confronted him.

Buffalo Billy knew that resistance was useless. Still, he looked about desperately, as if meditating a reckless dash. The cocking of other revolvers brought him to his senses.

"I'll surrender," he said, putting up his hands.

A man glided forward, wound a rope round his wrists, and Buffalo Billy was again captured. His late prisoner had sent forth that "chr—r" thinking he heard the movements of his pards outside. Now that his peril was ended and he was released he became rapidly venomous, and demanded the immediate death of the young scout. But his wishes were not gratified.

When the cavern had been looted of everything of value Buffalo Billy was conducted from it as a prisoner, the destination of the band being a secret rendezvous on the banks of the Rio Grande.

The hour was about midnight when the river was gained, some hundred yards above the outlaws' hiding-place. Here a boat was brought into use, and in this boat Billy was forced to embark with three of his captors.

The lad felt that if he escaped at all he must escape before Colino's stronghold was reached. His hands were bound, but his feet were not. He had writhed at the cords on his wrists until the skin had been torn, but the knots had not been tightly made, and he had so loosened the bonds that he knew another wrench would free his hands.

A desperate plan entered Buffalo Billy's mind as the prow of the boat cut the water. Two of the men were sitting in the stern of the boat, so that he was within the direct range of their vision. It was very dark, though, and they could only see his outline.

"The boat's tipping!" he suddenly cried, with a disconcerting yell.

Then he lurched into the stream, going down head first, and trying to overturn the boat with his feet. The heavy kick he gave it spun it half-round, and, though it did not overturn the boat, it served a good purpose in keeping the men from using their pistols. It was all they could do for a little while to retain their places. One of the paddles was dropped and swept away, and the boat swung broadside downstream. But the outlaws speedily regained control of the boat, and then watched, with eager eyes, for the reappearance of Buffalo Billy. They expected his head to bob to the surface, and meant to fire at it as soon as it was in sight.

But the darkness favoured the youth. He was a dozen yards downstream when he rose cautiously to the surface, and then he was not seen, though he could dimly make out the boat, and could plainly hear the exclamations and cries of the men. The boat was floating towards him, so he sank noiselessly and swam towards the American side of the river. The stream was not wide there and his feet soon touched bottom. When he cautiously poked up his head a black rock was beside it, which served further to make him invisible.

The outlaws on the shore had been alarmed, and also those further down. Questions and calls rang across the water. Two other boats soon appeared, and a search for Billy began. But the young scout, hiding beside the rock, was not seen. In about half an hour the search was given over, and the boats disappeared round the bend.

"Colino's stronghold must be there!"

With this reflection Buffalo Billy floated quietly down in the wake of the boat. At the turn of the angle he saw lights on the shore. There seemed to be a rocky, walled space leading into a lofty cavern. He crawled out of the water above this point, where he lay for a long time. When the men had disappeared in the rock-house he crept forward, boldly passed through the entrance, and lay just within by the side of the stone wall.

The interior of this rock-house was well lighted, and a number of men were visible. At one side was a table on which was heaped a quantity of silver coin, together with dies and moulds. Further back Billy fancied he beheld the glow of a furnace or crucible. This convinced him that he had discovered the rendezvous of the counterfeiters for

which he had been for some time diligently searching.

Much excitement seemed to exist. No doubt this excitement pertained to himself. As he lay there a party passed him, going out in search of him. Then a sentinel was stationed at the door beyond him. His situation then became critical, for the man began to walk to and fro in the opening, the inner limit of his walk bringing him almost within a touch of Billy's hand.

Another man hurried from the cave to join those who had just gone out.

"Colino's red hot," he said to the guard. "He thinks the boys let that fellow git away through carelessness. He wouldn't have had it happen for a mint of money."

"Counterfeit money, eh?" the sentry queried, with a laugh.

"Well, if the chap's caught it will go hard with him. I've about come to the notion that he's drowned. We'll know in the morning. He can hardly get away without making some kind of a trail!"

The man passed on, and the sentry in his walk came nearer and nearer to the hidden boy. Billy could not move away because of the wall, nor could he go towards the sentry without danger of detection. Then the man, extending his walk further than ever, stepped on one of Billy's outstretched hands. The pain was unendurable. The lad jerked the hand away, lifted himself with a yell, and leaped at the sentry's throat.

The outlaw reeled backward, half-lifting his rifle, which Buffalo Billy dashed aside. The movement opened a way of escape, and the young scout, taking instant advantage of it, sprang by. The sentry's rifle blazed, and an alarmed hubbub came from the rock-house, followed by cries and calls from the men who had gone out.

Judging by the use of the boats that there was but one way in or out of the place, the daring fugitive boldly took a header into the river and swam downstream as fast as he could. A pursuit by boats was begun, but it was fruitless, and before day dawned Buffalo Billy had left the stronghold of Colino far behind.

CHAPTER 5.

In the Soldiers' Camp. — Awkward Encounters.

"I'M going down there!"

This was Buffalo Billy's announcement to his friend, Bob Roundtree, as they looked from the summit of a hill into the valley which contained the encampment of soldiers.

"A leetle bit risky, don't you think? It was a job to git you out of that camp, and now you want to git back."

"But don't you think it's better to go there now, while Crosscut is away?"

Rio Grande Rob shook his head. They had discussed the question before. From that summit they had seen Lieutenant Crosscut and a small detachment ride from the camp and disappear in the adjacent hills.

"Captain Marchmont seemed an honest sort of man, and I am willing to trust him. I can tell him the truth, show him my credentials, and ask him to help us instead of hindering us in our work."

The experiment was regarded as a dubious one by the over-cautious Roundtree.

"You're the navigator, though," he admitted. "If so be you go ahead, why, I'll do ditto."

"Then we'll go ahead."

"You don't think I'd better stay back, so's to git you out o' trouble—unkink the snarl that I feel it in my bones you're gittin' yourself into?"

"I don't think so. The straight way is usually the best way."

Buffalo Billy was mounted and Rio Grande Rob afoot, and in this manner they set off for the camp in the valley, Roundtree leading the way. But both were somewhat uneasy and uncertain as to the outcome of the venture. They came within view of the soldiers, were directed by a sentry to the captain's quarters, and then moved on quietly until the nearest tent was gained, when the young scout-detective sprang lightly from his saddle.

As he did so he and his pard were treated to a bewildering surprise. The flap of the tent was pushed aside, and Lizzie Benson, the niece of Brace Benson, stood revealed.

"By the great stone nose of my——" Billy began, then became speechless.

Lizzie Benson was the very last person they had expected to see in the soldier camp.

"I beg pardon," she stammered.

"We're the ones to beg pardon," Buffalo Billy declared. "We didn't expect to see you here, and that's a fact."

"No?" and she elevated her eyebrows. "We are here through the kindness of Lieutenant Crosscut."

"Then you know him?" the lad gasped, almost involuntarily.

Rio Grande Rob touched him on the shoulder.

"Better come on," he growled in a half-whisper. "We're being stared at. Them soldiers recognise you, I reckon."

Buffalo Billy hurried on with Bob Roundtree, leading his horse and in momentary expectation of arrest, and soon found himself before the tent that had been pointed out to them as the captain's. Into this tent they were conducted, while Billy's horse was led away.

"So you thought you would come back before you were run down and captured," said Marchmont, looking the young scout sharply in the face.

Billy was feeling in his pockets for some documents, which he produced, and then threw back a flap of his coat.

"I want you to look at that first, Captain Marchmont, and then at these papers," was his earnest request. "They will show you, I think, that I was held wrongly by you the other night."

Captain Marchmont opened his eyes and stared in wide surprise. The flap of the coat turned back revealed a Secret Service badge; and the letters which Marchmont instantly examined told him that Buffalo Billy, or William Cody, was really for the time being a police officer, with credentials duly authenticated. The papers proved that he had been commissioned to look up certain criminals known to be in that section of the Rio Grande region. The captain could hardly repress a low whistle of astonishment.

"Why didn't you show these before? You'd have been treated differently," he said.

Then he paused, while a look of uncertainty crept into his eyes and the old suspicion clouded his face.

"But," and he seemed to weigh his words, "you mustn't forget that it's quite possible you have no right to these papers. You may have taken them from William Cody, you see. How am I to——"

"I tell you, captain, he's as straight as a string," put in Rio Grande Rob somewhat testily.

"And who's to vouch for you? You look like a cowboy rather than a detective!"

"K'rect you aire, captain," Roundtree cheerfully assented. "That's jist what I am. I'm a cowboy, and I've straddled a cow pony for more years than I've got fingers and toes. All the same, I know that the story my young friend hyar has strung you is as straight as a wire fence."

The captain turned the papers over in his hands, and then carefully reread them, studying the face of the youth before him as he did so. At length he handed them back.

"I've no reason to doubt your word, Mr. Cody. I'm sure I beg your pardon if I have wronged you. For the present you have the freedom of the camp, you and your companion. You will not violate it, I'm sure. By the way, the matter of your escape before has not been explained."

Here Roundtree put in a word, insisting that he was the party to be blamed, if anyone, and he made so brilliant and flourishing a defence of his young friend that a smile was won from the serious captain.

An officer then came to the tent door, and was invited in and made acquainted with the statements made by Buffalo Billy and his pard.

"We were mistaken, sergeant, I don't doubt, when we held this young man. He and his partner are, at present, our friends and guests. Introduce them to the officers and see that they are so treated."

The young scout-detective and Rio Grande Rob followed the sergeant out into the open air, feeling that they had gained a victory, though they had the uneasy sensation that the victory was

a doubtful one, which might not serve them long.

Several times that evening Buffalo Billy passed near the tent which held Lizzie Benson, yet he had not the courage to step up to its door and address her. He wondered if she were there, accompanied by her uncle, and almost decided that Brace Benson was not in the camp, inasmuch as he was not to be seen.

Night came, and with it the return of a body of men which Billy presumed to be the detachment that had gone out with Lieutenant Crosscut. He did not see Crosscut with them, and marvelled at it. Finally he made up his mind to approach Lizzie Benson's tent, offer some excuse for his intrusion, and seek to start a conversation that should tell why she was there.

As Buffalo Billy's feet were on the threshold he was interrupted by voices —the voices of Lizzie Benson and Lieutenant Crosscut—and at once the lad stepped backward and away from the door of the tent. Again Crosscut's voice sounded, and Billy, realising that he was playing a sneaking part, turned to leave. But he had lost his caution, and as he turned about he trod unwarily on a rotten mesquite branch, which broke under his foot with a sharp crackle. Instantly, as it seemed, Crosscut was out of the tent.

"You scoundrel!" he roared in anger. "What do you mean by eavesdropping here?"

Then he saw, by the light of the camp-fire, which burned but dimly, who the intruder was, and his anger increased.

"Ah! you are the fellow that cut his way out of the tent," Crosscut exclaimed. "One of Colino's men, who had the audacity to come back here and the effrontery to spy on my movements within my own camp! Yes, you are one of Colino's men!"

"That's a lie!" Buffalo Billy hissed in a tone that was low, but which contained the very essence of resentment. "That's a lie, and you know it!"

Crosscut dropped back as if struck by a blow in the face, and seemed about to draw his sword.

"You can't scare me with that thing! I'm not afraid of your sword, and if you want to fight me I'm willing to meet you!" said Billy.

"No fighting here!" the girl cried, hurrying out of the tent and placing herself between the belligerents.

The boy scout-detective knew that he was in an awkward situation. He felt that his explanations would be deemed by Crosscut, and probably by this girl also, to be mere falsehoods.

"I didn't know you were in the tent," he said to the lieutenant. "I came to speak to this young woman, Miss Benson."

"That's all right. But that don't make it your business to come here eavesdropping!"

"I was not eavesdropping!" cried Billy.

"That's a——"

"No fighting now, Lieutenant Crosscut!" the girl interposed sharply. "I don't doubt our young friend here will be able to make everything clear. Promise me, both of you," she added in an appealing tone, "to keep the peace. You must not let this go further. It is disgraceful!"

Buffalo Billy was about to turn away when she detained him.

"Just a few words with you," she said, giving Crosscut a look which dismissed him from her presence.

"You don't wish to speak to this—this fellow," the lieutenant protested, hesitating.

"Yes, just a word," replied the girl.

Crosscut could do nothing but walk away. Lizzie Benson came close to the young scout, who was stupefied with amazement, and said hurriedly:

"I'm sorry this happened. I do not blame you, understand. I know you didn't mean any harm. Better avoid Lieutenant Crosscut. Above all things don't fight him. Promise me that you won't fight him."

"I'll certainly not do so if I can avoid it," replied the young scout.

"And remember, I don't think you meant any harm by what you did."

"Thank you!" said Billy, and then, observing that Crosscut was impatiently waiting for him to be gone, he hastened from the tent.

"She didn't say how long I was to

keep away from him," he muttered, stumbling along. "The scoundrel, to call me one of Colino's men! If Colino has a spy in this camp it's Lieutenant Crosscut himself!"

"Eh, what's that?"

Billy had reached the tent occupied by himself and Rio Grande Rob, and the question came from his pard.

"I'd like to shoot Lieutenant Crosscut!" Billy declared. "He's the biggest villain alive."

"Tell me all about it!" staring with lazy surprise into the young scout's angry face.

This Billy did, and almost immediately Bob Roundtree left the tent.

No sooner was Rio Grande Rob gone from the tent than Buffalo Billy began to search in his pockets for writing material. He found the stub of a pencil, and a notebook, from which he tore some pages, then scribbled the following note to Lizzie Benson:

"MISS BENSON,—I write this to declare to you that I am not a member of Colino's band, as Lieutenant Crosscut charged. Whatever you may think of me, I hope you won't think that. Some day I may be able to give you the proof of what I say. Pardon me for thus writing to you.—Faithfully yours,

"WILLIAM F. CODY."

The lad read it over and over, hardly knowing whether to send it to her or not. He was still pondering the question when the flap of the tent shook and Rio Grande Rob entered.

"The game's afoot!" he whispered in much excitement.

"What do you mean?" questioned Billy.

"I've been scoutin' 'round," explained Roundtree. "Brace Benson's been in the camp. He's been in that tent, talkin' to his niece, and may have been there when you had your racket with the lieutenant. And now him and Crosscut have left the camp together, and have gone over the perairie. I think they're goin' to jine Colino, fer some reason. I heard 'em say Eagle Rock, and I know where that is. I watched 'em that fur, an' then I sneaked to the captain's tent, an' I said to the captain, says I, 'Will you be so good as to permit me an' my pardner to leave the camp fer a while to-night? We'll not take any hoss with us, and we'll try to be back before mornin'.'"

"Well, what did he say?" asked Billy as Roundtree paused.

"Why, the captain he up and tells me, jist like a gentleman, that we're not prisoners, an' kin go and come jist when we please. An' so I thanked him, and he give me these passes, an' we're goin' to put out o' hyar jist as fast as our legs will let us."

The young scout-detective was naturally much astonished, and demanded further explanations.

"Now, we can't trace 'em afoot," Roundtree admitted. "I calc'lated to git them two hosses that aire in the valley near our headquarters, you know. We kin walk to that p'int in a half-hour. I kin make hackermores fer bridles, and we kin git along without saddles, as we've done many a time. What do you say?"

"Just a minute, and I'm with you."

Buffalo Billy tore out another sheet from the notebook and scribbled a few lines of explanation to Captain Marchmont. While he was doing it Roundtree went in search of Marchmont's little son, in accordance with Billy's wishes, and when he came back with him the young scout put into the boy's hands the two notes, requesting him to deliver them without delay.

When they had worked their way out of the camp Buffalo Billy and his pard hastened to the valley, secured the horses mentioned by Roundtree, and started at a swinging gallop for Eagle Rock, on the Rio Grande.

CHAPTER 6.

In the Power of Colino.—A Daring Rescue.—A Shot from the Dark.

THE light of a camp-fire shone through the darkness. Buffalo Billy and his pard had drawn near Eagle Rock and dismounted. They were now standing at their horses' heads, gazing at the camp-fire, which rose and fell fitfully, under the influence of the breeze.

"Better hopple 'em and leave 'em here," suggested the young scout, suiting the action to the word and producing a rope for the purpose of tying the legs of his horse so that it could not wander far.

When both horses had been fettered Buffalo Billy and Bob Roundtree stole carefully on foot in the direction of the camp-fire. When they were within a hundred yards of it and could dimly discern the figures of the men gathered about it, Billy went on alone, creeping from bush to rock with the greatest care. He flattened himself out behind a big boulder twenty yards or more from the base of Eagle Rock and stared at the men there grouped. They were now to be seen distinctly. With them sat Lieutenant Crosscut and Brace Benson. All were talking eagerly. Their horses were picketed not far away.

Anxious to hear what was being said and to establish in his own mind more firmly the guilt of Benson and the lieutenant, Buffalo Billy left the shelter of the rock and again advanced, keeping his gaze fixed on the figure at the fire. A sentry was crouching not far away, and the young scout, walking in a semicircle to gain a better point, fell fairly over this sentry. He felt his feet and legs gripped, and this was followed by a jerking, downward pull. However, he was not to be taken without an effort. He was large and strong—a man in size, though only a boy in years; and, whirling on his back with the quickness of a cat, he reached up and drew the sentry down on top of him, squeezing him to his chest with a hug like that of a grizzly bear.

The sentry gave a yell, and then Buffalo Billy found himself rolling over and over among the rocks in a desperate fight with the man.

"Take that, will you!" the lad exclaimed at last, freeing his fist and dashing it into the outlaw's face.

The blow was a heavy one, so heavy that the man half-released his hands, and in another minute Buffalo Billy would probably have succeeded in freeing himself and making off. But the sentry's cry had not gone unheeded. It had created a wild commotion at the camp-fire, and the young scout, now in the moment of his victory, was set on by half a dozen men, who pulled him rudely backward, with harsh cries.

"Who is it?" Colino demanded, his question echoed by others.

Crosscut looked into the flushed face of the prisoner, who was dragged to the fire.

"It's that boy!" he cried in utter amazement. "Colino, you've made a capture! Don't let him get away! Kill him, now that you've got him! And I say," he added, "his pard must be near here. They always hunt together, like a pair of snakes."

Buffalo Billy, even in that whirl of excitement, had thought of Rio Grande Rob. He had more than half expected that Roundtree would dash to his assistance, in spite of the peril, for he knew how courageous his pard was when courage was demanded.

A quick order was given by Colino, and two or three men slipped out into the darkness away from the light of the fire. The others, with Brace Benson and Crosscut, gathered about the prisoner, many of them with uplifted hands, as if they meant to strike him.

Buffalo Bill saw that there was not a gleam of hope for him in any of the faces around him. He felt that if Roundtree did not come to his aid his minutes were numbered.

"Look you here!" commanded Colino, with sudden fierceness. "You remember when you kicked me at Brace Benson's, after the fire?"

The young scout stared into Colino's face, and for the first time recognised him as the man who had been hiding under the old clothes, and who had called himself a cowboy and given his name as Sam Adair. The recognition did not tend to allay his fears.

"You and your pard kicked and choked me then like as if I was a dog," Colino continued. "It's my turn now! What are you doing here?"

Buffalo Billy drew himself up sturdily. He resolved not to show fear in the presence of these men.

"I'll see you hanged before I'll answer any of your questions," he said.

One of the men picked up a brand from the fire and thrust it near the lad's throat.

"Shall I scar him?" he asked.

But another of the Firebrands plucked away the burning stick, saying:

"Tell us what you're doing in this country. Oh, we know who you are!"

Buffalo Billy firmly closed his lips.

"You won't answer, eh?" roared Juan Colino. "Are your rifles ready, boys? Tie his hands."

Billy was quickly seized and his hands and feet bound with rope. Then he was carried to a knoll a little distance away, and a firing party of three men lined up in front of him, with rifles held in readiness.

Colino took out a watch and began to count off the seconds.

"I'll give you just a minute to speak —no more! If you don't open your mouth at the end of that time, I'll order my men to shoot you!"

There was no relenting in his tone. Buffalo Billy could not doubt that he meant every word, and that at the expiration of the minute those rifles would belch forth their contents and he would fall a corpse if he did not reply to Colino's questions.

Twenty seconds went by. Thirty seconds. The nerve strain was terrible, and the young scout felt his courage failing. The silence was like that of a graveyard. Not a man spoke. Only Colino, standing there with the watch in his hand, slowly counting.

Suddenly a revolver-shot rang out, followed by wild cries and the tramping of hoofs, throwing all into confusion. Colino turned, with the watch in his hand. Then out of the gloom of the night there leaped a horse and rider. The horseman was Rio Grande Rob.

Buffalo Billy's pard had not been idle all those minutes. He had seen and understood what had happened, knew well the peril of his pard, and had acted without delay. When Bob saw the searchers hurry out into the darkness under Colino's instruction, he got away from the vicinity with great stealth and celerity, and ran to the hoppled horses. One of these, the largest and strongest, as well as the fleetest, he released and got ready for the desperate plan that was forming in his mind.

The firelight was to be seen from that point, with the excited figures grouped about it. He saw his young friend tied and stood out on the knoll to be shot, and it did not need words to explain to him the meaning of the scene before him. Drawing his revolver, he threw himself on the horse's back and urged it towards the camp-fire. He came like a whirlwind, too, utterly reckless of consequences, as it seemed. At every leap of the big horse his revolver spoke, and one of those fierce and terrifying yells came from his lips.

The noise made by Bob and the horse, with the crack, crack of the revolver, was demoralising. It was hard to tell whether one or a dozen men were charging the camp, and Colino's followers, surprised and thrown into a half-panic, fell back before his onset. It was all done in less than a minute! Roundtree crashed through the crowd about the camp-fire, and then, seizing Buffalo Billy, who still stood helplessly bound on the knoll, he pulled him up in front of him on the back of the horse, Indian fashion.

"Hang on!" he whispered.

Then he half-turned and sent the last shot out of his revolver at Juan Colino, who was recovering his wits and beginning to shout out orders. The bullet cut through Colino's hat, but it did not sufficiently disconcert the chief of the Firebrands to cause him to cease his commands. He had got out his own pistol, and now began to fire at the retreating forms, urging his men to do the same, and a rain of rifle and revolver bullets stormed around Bob's head. But they were ineffectual. The horse received a slight wound in the shoulder, but neither Buffalo Billy nor Roundtree was hurt.

Colino saw, as did also Brace Benson and Lieutenant Crosscut, how needful it was to keep these men from getting away.

The Firebrands required no urging. In a very short time a number of them had their horses ready and were thundering along after the fugitives.

Bob Roundtree pulled Billy a little higher on the shoulders of the horse, then reached over and cut the bonds that held the lad's hands and feet.

"We'll try it double," he said, slow-

ing the pace of the horse. "Ride astride in front of me!"

Buffalo Billy lost no time in obeying. He was soon seated astride, and they hurried on again, changing their course to baffle the pursuers.

The double load told painfully on the horse, and if it had been daylight, instead of night, the young detective and his pard would have been overtaken, for Colino's men rode some fast animals. But, by doubling and twisting, their Firebrand pursuers were at length given the slip.

* * * * *

"Halt! Who goes there?"

The challenge came from the sentry at the soldiers' camp, and was directed to Buffalo Billy and Bob Roundtree. They made the declaration that they were friends, showed the passes furnished by Captain Marchmont and gave the countersign, and were permitted to pass.

When past the sentry they dismounted and, leading the tired horse, went on to Marchmont's tent, where they made their presence known and asked for an interview, in spite of the unseemly hour. Scarcely had they done so when they again heard the sentry call out:

"Who goes there?"

Buffalo Billy had come to a stern resolve. He knew, now, that Crosscut was a villain of the deepest dye, a member of Colino's band, and a double-faced traitor, and, knowing all this, he intended to denounce him to Captain Marchmont without further delay. Not only that, he intended to demand Crosscut's arrest and surrender to the civil authorities for trial.

Marchmont came to the door of the tent, somewhat bewildered by the request for an interview at that time. He had been aroused from sleep. Back within the tent a lamp had been lighted, and, as the captain appeared, his form dimly revealed by its lights, Buffalo Billy stepped forward, hat in hand. Captain Marchmont could not see him plainly, and called out suspiciously:

"Who's that out there? Is that you, Cody?"

The tone seemed to indicate that the captain's mind had been poisoned against Buffalo Billy, probably by the allegations of Lieutenant Crosscut.

The young scout promptly informed the captain who he was, and what he wanted, at the same time stepping nearer; and then, out of the darkness behind him, a revolver flamed, and Captain Marchmont dropped to the ground without a cry. The wildest commotion followed. Though Rio Grande Rob almost felt the powder burn his shoulder, he did not see who it was that fired the shot. The murderously-minded wretch leaped backward before Roundtree could turn.

Buffalo Billy sprang forward and tried to lift the fallen form of the captain. A sense of horror thrilled him. He did not doubt that murder had been deliberately committed.

Bob Roundtree, almost as much excited as his pard, dashed into the tent, snatched up the lamp, and ran out with it that he might ascertain the character of the captain's injury and know what to do.

The soldiers were collecting by this time, and a sergeant pushed forward with loud inquiries. Behind the sergeant came Lieutenant Crosscut, also voluble with questions and in apparent great mental distress.

"Seize those men!" he commanded when his eyes fell on Billy and Roundtree. "They are the men who have done this!"

A dozen hands were reached forward to execute the order. Both Bob Roundtree and his young pard drew indignantly back.

"Ah, what is this?" Crosscut questioned, stooping to pick up something against which his foot had stumbled, and holding it aloft.

It was Buffalo Billy's revolver, which had been taken from him by Colino's men at the time of his capture that very night.

Crosscut turned it over and examined it; then slipped out the cylinder. One of its chambers was empty. He held it up, exhibiting the empty chamber.

"It's clear who shot the captain," he declared, with a fierce vehemence. "Take charge of this revolver, sergeant. We'll need it as evidence."

"Not so fast!" Roundtree protested.

"That captain of yours mayn't be dead, though there's some that hopes he is, I don't doubt."

He shot a meaning glance at Crosscut, who was bending over the captain. It was clear to Buffalo Billy and his pard that Lieutenant Crosscut had shot his superior officer, and that he had used that revolver to cause it to seem that Billy was the murderer. They believed, also, that Crosscut had gone about the thing with some deliberation, knowing that he would be the one in command after Marchmont's death, and anxious to have supreme control for a while, that he might dispose of these dangerous enemies. However, it became clear, as water was applied and the wound examined, that the shot was not a fatal one—not even seriously dangerous in its character, and the captain would soon be well again.

Buffalo Billy and Bob Roundtree were not permitted to linger longer, but were led away and thrust into a tent, where a double guard was set over them. They knew that the situation was serious, their peril very real.

Captain Marchmont was respected by his men. The soldiers had seen the accusing revolver held up by Crosscut, and had no reason to doubt the truthfulness of the charges or the lieutenant's motives in making them. That Crosscut was not personally popular did not matter in a case like this. The story that the young scout had shot the captain went around the camp like wildfire, and a settled rage at once resulted.

Crosscut talked to the sergeant as the wound was examined and the captain made comfortable, speaking all the time in a way to be heard by the assistants and soldiers grouped about, asserting that Buffalo Billy and Bob Roundtree were members of Colino's band of Rough Riders, and speculating as to why they had so boldly attempted the murder.

The credulous soldiers listened, believingly, as Crosscut stated his notion that Billy and Roundtree, knowing Colino was in peril from the presence of the soldiers under the leadership of Captain Marchmont, had hoped to turn the soldiers back by murdering their commander, thinking, by the very daring with which the deed was committed, to escape suspicion.

Captain Marchmont was placed on the cot in his tent, and the surgeon, who had now come forward and had charge of the case, ordered the application of strong stimulants.

"Will he die, surgeon?" Crosscut questioned, hardly able to conceal his real feelings on the subject.

The surgeon looked into the captain's face and felt his pulse.

"Not a bit of it! He's worth a dozen dead men! I'll have him sitting up and giving his orders to all before morning."

The traitor lieutenant turned away with great bitterness of heart. He could not consider that his plans had been a success so long as Marchmont lived.

CHAPTER 7.

Lizzie Benson's Heroism.—The Telltale Letter.

Lizzie Benson sat, almost crouched, in the tent that had been assigned to her and her uncle while that wild tumult raged. In her inmost heart she knew that Buffalo Billy was not guilty of the crime Lieutenant Crosscut had so fiercely charged him with. She did not know that Crosscut, as well as her uncle, belonged to Colino's band of Rough Riders. She had carefully read the note Billy had sent her by the hand of the captain's son, and now, when she felt that he was in such great peril, she hesitated, not knowing what to do, until she got out the note and re-read it. If anything was needed to convince her further of the innocence of the young scout, she found it in that note, and her resolve was at once taken.

Impelled by overmastering curiosity, the girl left the tent and walked towards that of the captain, where she saw the soldiers gathered. A good deal of time had elapsed since the firing of the shot. Buffalo Billy and Roundtree were under guard, and she quickly became aware of the fact that Lieutenant Crosscut and her uncle, Brace Benson, were not at the captain's tent. They were in the lee of a rock, near Benson's tent, a discovery she made by hearing a single word incautiously uttered by her uncle. The word held

a great deal of meaning. She had meant to approach and speak to them; now she decided to approach without making her presence known, and thus hear what they were talking about.

"Let's see!" Crosscut was saying. "It's only a little over three hours till daylight. Can you get Colino and the boys here in that time?"

The reply came in the voice of her uncle:

"They were to collect at the dove-cote, you know. Yes, I reckon I can make it."

The "dove-cote" was a rocky bluff filled with holes, which gave it a fancied resemblance to a very large pigeon-house.

"We can't fail in this thing," Crosscut half-whispered. "The captain will be all right in a little while, confound him! I thought he was done for. We've got to move quick, before he recovers. You must get the boys here and have them make an assault on the camp, pretending that they are trying to rescue the prisoners. Everyone thinks the chaps belong to Colino's band, and that will make it seem certain. Of course they'll be shot in the melee that follows, and we'll be rid of them for good."

The listening girl was filled with horror. Such villainy she had never dreamed possible. She could not doubt that her uncle and Crosscut were members of that terrible band of Rough Riders of the Rio Grande, of whom she had heard so much under the name of Colino's Firebrands. Nor could she doubt that one of the speakers had shot the captain.

"We've got to carry the thing through," she heard Crosscut continue. "If we don't, it's all up with both of us. Unless"—and here he hesitated—"I can make it seem that their evidence is not worth listening to. I thought, with Marchmont out of the way, we'd have things just as we wanted them. I took away that young scoundrel's badge and documents, so that, no matter what happened, he couldn't again show his authority for playing detective. But all that won't matter if the captain is all right and in command, for he has seen those things. No, there is only one sure way. Have Colino make a dash, as if to rescue them, and, in the defence, we'll see that the detectives get bullets through them."

"And I reckon I'd better be movin' my legs to do that!" declared Brace Benson, rising softly. "I'll take that big black horse and I'll make him fly."

"Yes, there's no time to lose," Crosscut advised. "Move as if imps were after you. I'll have everything here ready for you. We're bound to win."

When they were gone Lizzie Benson crept breathlessly back to her tent, her mind in a whirl of uncertainty and confusion. She did not know what to do. But there was one thing that rose above every other thought—she must do something to save the prisoners from death.

The girl waited in the tent until half an hour or more had passed, filled with a fierce impatience, yet fearing to emerge. And all that while she was striving to decide on the best manner of aiding the prisoners. By the talk of the soldiers, who now and then passed, she learned that Marchmont was still in an unconscious condition. She had been to the captain's tent and offered her services; now she resolved to go again. He might regain his senses, even while she was there, and furnish the opportunity she sought of warning him of the dreadful thing contemplated.

Lizzie went to the tent and was admitted. But she was not favoured. Marchmont lay as if breathing his last, though the surgeon, who was present, assured her that the captain's condition was very favourable. There was no one in the camp to whom she now dared to go with her story. She went back to her tent and was again considering the situation. She knew that her uncle had ridden away to bring Colino's men, and that Crosscut was awaiting the coveted opportunity to shoot the prisoners. The lieutenant was in command, while Marchmont lay unconscious, and this fact decided her on a step she would otherwise have drawn back from with terror and trembling.

All interest was centred in the captain's tent, and Lizzie Benson was not seen when she slipped, shadow-like, through the darkness and crept surreptitiously to the rear of the guard-tent

which was occupied by Buffalo Billy and Bob Roundtree. Although the tent was doubly guarded, she managed to writhe up to it from the rear and to thrust her head under the canvas. She drew back with a start. The tent was dimly lighted, a low-burning lamp having been set on a box near the centre to illuminate it and render its occupants visible to the guards.

A blanket was lying near, which the girl cautiously drew about her head. Then she looked again and discovered that the prisoners were tightly bound. With the blanket drawn about her she crawled forward, dropping down whenever she heard the guards. The blanket was so excellent a concealment that they would probably not have observed her had they looked in. But Buffalo Billy, who was wide awake, saw her. He was discreet enough, however, to keep silent. Then he beheld her draw the blanket from about her face, and, recognising her, was too bewildered to speak. She pushed a small pocket-knife towards him, then crawled still nearer and whispered:

"Don't move! Don't say a word! I've come to help you! You'll be killed if you stay here."

Bob Roundtree rolled over, rubbed his eyes, and looked her full in the face. Her words had awakened him. He understood the situation and made no further movement.

"The captain will get well," she continued. "You must leave here. Crosscut is to have you killed. I haven't time to explain more. But you must go. You must trust me."

The words were whispered so lowly that the closest attention was needed to render them intelligible. However, they came to Buffalo Billy quite clearly, and this reiteration of her commands, and the entreaty in her voice, decided him. He hesitated no longer, but cut the bonds that held his feet, and then those that bound his pard.

Lizzie was already turning to crawl away, but he thrust the knife back into her hands, and then followed her, he and Roundtree moving across the floor of the tent with the stillness and almost the slowness of a shadow crawling across the face of a dial. Almost five minutes elapsed before they found themselves outside of the tent and crawling away from it into the darkness. When they had covered a good distance and began to feel more secure they halted, and Buffalo Billy turned inquiringly to the girl.

"I must go back to our tent," she whispered. "You must not stay here. Get out of the camp as quickly as you can."

And she told what she had heard passing between Crosscut and her uncle.

"Then we'll go on," said the young scout-detective. "I'm almost sorry you put yourself in such danger for us. But we will go. The time will come, I am sure, when we can show we are not guilty and run down these scamps."

Lizzie Benson turned back to her tent, and the fugitives slipped away in the direction of the horses, which were corralled further down the valley. By careful manœuvring they passed the sentries and were approaching the horses when an outcry and commotion announced that their escape from the guard-tent had been discovered.

Buffalo Billy rose to his feet and glanced back.

"No use delaying now," he said. "We must have a pair of horses, whether they are ours or not."

The horses were not a dozen yards away, and fortunately the attention of the sentries in charge of them was drawn at that instant towards the camp, where the sounds of alarm were rising.

The young scout leaped to one horse and Bob Roundtree to another. The hopples were cast off the animals, and each horse, though without saddle or bridle, but with a rider on its back, raced at a rapid rate out of the valley towards the plain below. The sentries' rifles cracked and the alarm resolved itself into a general tumult. But Buffalo Billy and his pard were already beyond the reach of successful pursuit.

* * * * *

Captain Marchmont had been unconscious from the moment the shot was fired that brought him down in the door of his tent.

When the alarm sounded everyone hurried out of the tent, even to the surgeon. The last to go was Lieu-

tenant Crosscut, who had been sitting at the head of the cot studying the wounded officer's face.

The captain, aroused to full consciousness by the outcry, lifted himself on his elbow. As he did so he beheld a folded sheet of paper that had dropped from Crosscut's pocket. The light from the lamp that shone at the head of the cot clearly revealed the writing. Seeing its value, and feeling justified in the act, because of its importance and the singular address it bore, Captain Marchmont leaned over, picked it from the ground, and ran over it with staring eyes. It was a letter which Lieutenant Crosscut had written to Captain Colino, the chief of the Rough Riders, and was of a startling character. It contained an account of how Crosscut had shot the captain, and his reasons for doing it, which showed that his intention had been to kill. Not only that, it contained an outline of the plot to bring about the death of the prisoners, Buffalo Billy and Bob Roundtree.

Marchmont stared as if stupefied. His whole frame shook, and his face, which had been white and bloodless before, grew absolutely ashen. But the information held in that letter had really strengthened the captain instead of weakening him. It was like a strong stimulant. He folded it and placed it in the bosom of his shirt, where he felt it would be safe. Then he lay back on the cot and closed his eyes in a vain endeavour to think clearly and connectedly. A maze of doubt suddenly encompassed him. He had never dreamed that Crosscut was one of the Texas Firebrands. Many things that had seemed enigmatical before became clear as he reclined there, forgetful of the tumult, thinking, thinking!

"The traitor!" he at length hissed. "The traitor! And to think that I have been so blind!"

He lifted himself again and looked down at the spot where he had seen the letter lying, and became aware that another paper lay there. He half-rose and picked it up, and as he read it an exclamation broke from his pallid lips. It also had been written by Crosscut, and it made the astonishing declaration that the girl known as Lizzie Benson was not the niece of Brace Benson, but the daughter of Captain Marchmont, and that her name was Bessie Marchmont!

"Good heavens! can this be true?" he wildly questioned, pressing a hand to his wounded and aching head.

Then he re-read the letter with staring eyes. This is how it ran:

"I found this out by a sort of half-accident. Benson spoke of it in his sleep one night when I was camping with him, and used the name of Lee Dayton. I went to Dayton the next day, pretended to know all about it, and got the truth out of him, so far as he could give it to me. It seems that Captain Marchmont had a daughter who was two or three years old when the campaign against Kizell and his Apaches was going on in Arizona. He took the little girl and her mother, his wife, to some fort down there, where he could be near them. One day, while his wife and daughter were strolling with some friends in a canyon within sight of the fort, a lot of Apaches crept on them and killed every one in the crowd except the little girl, whom they carried away.

"Dayton and another chap, both mining at the time, had the good luck to rescue the girl two years afterwards. They found her with an old Apache, and bought her for a rifle and a flask of whisky, and, not knowing who she was, carried her with them into the mines. They found a locket tied to her neck, with a picture and a piece of paper in it, the paper saying her name was Bessie Marchmont. They didn't know of any Marchmonts, and they began to like the little girl, and after a while they began not to want to find any of the Marchmonts.

"At length Dayton's partner died, and he got, as a new pard, Brace Benson, whom he ran across in Silver City, it seems. Benson got it into his head that maybe it would be money in their pockets if he could find the little girl's folks, and he made some inquiries, but it did not amount to anything. Then Dayton fell ill with the mountain fever, and before he was well Benson had to leave that part, having got mixed up in a shooting scrape. He took the

LONG STORIES of BUFFALO BILL

APPEAR IN

Buffalo Bill Novels

Price 4d.

Two new books of this series are published on the Third Thursday of each month, some recent numbers being:—

43. **Buffalo Bill's First Trail**
44. **The Crimson Arrow**
45. **Buffalo Bill on Secret Service**
46. **The Renegade Queen**
47. **Buffalo Bill and the Gold King**
48. **The Amazon of the West**
49. **Buffalo Bill at "Last Chance"**
50. **Hermits of the Grand Canyon**
51. **Buck Taylor**
52. **The Tigers of Texas**
53. **Buffalo Bill's Big Haul**
54. **Buffalo Bill's False Ally**

Of all newsagents price 4d., or post free from the Publisher for

5½d. in Stamps.

THE GOODSHIP HOUSE
(Aldine Publishing Co., Ltd.),
Crown Court, Chancery Lane, W.C.

girl with him. Dayton did not see him again until last year, here in Texas. Then Benson was calling the girl Lizzie Benson, and was saying she was his niece. As it had been a long time, and Dayton had almost forgotten the child, he let it pass at that, especially as Benson seemed to think a great deal of her and did not want her to know she was no kin to him.

"Then we came into the neighbourhood, and Benson, still smelling gold, went to work to discover something of the child's kindred. He found out, without any doubt, that the girl whom he called his niece was Marchmont's own daughter. He has been figuring on that fact to get him out of any scrape he may fall into, for he thinks the captain, when he knows how well he has treated the girl, won't push any case against him, and, besides, he's calculating to get a pile of money out of Marchmont for restoring to him his daughter. But I am aiming to get ahead of him, and he, like a fool, is helping me. He thinks it a good idea to have my friendship, and I don't know but he is right.

"Now, I intend to marry the girl, and marry her before she finds out that she is related to Marchmont. If I waited till she knew that, I reckon my cake would be dough. Benson is urging her to marry me, or, at any rate, he don't seem to be putting anything in my path. Captain Marchmont is a very rich man apart from his pay as an army officer. As his son-in-law I will come in for a good round sum of money. It is as good a way to get money as I know. I have got other ways, but they are riskier by a good deal."

The captain's hands shook as he read this extraordinary letter. It was not written, like the first, to Colino, but to a man in Ohio who had been aiding Lieutenant Crosscut in some way.

Captain Marchmont had heard not a sound of all that was occurring outside the tent. He was deaf and blind to everything but the revelations of that night. Lizzie Benson—his daughter Bessie, whom he believed to have been killed so many years ago by Apaches in Arizona! He pictured his little girl as he had seen her the last time, when

he had parted from her and her mother, and then he recalled, with the old pang, how the depressing news had come to him of her mother's death and of the little girl's capture. He remembered how he had tried to recover her; how he had followed clue after clue, and how his heart almost broke when he became convinced that she, as well as her mother, was dead.

The captain was still holding the letter in his shaking hands when a step sounded beside him, and he glanced up to see Lieutenant Crosscut. The scoundrel had entered softly, thinking the captain still unconscious, and had been bewildered beyond measure to behold Marchmont sitting erect in that manner. The wounded officer looked like a man who had risen from the grave, with his white face and the bandage round his head.

"Do you see this?" he said, and his words were almost a gurgle, so intense were his emotions. "You wrote this. Tell me, is it true?"

Lieutenant Crosscut in that instant seemed to become transformed into a demon. No doubt fear was largely instrumental in the change. With one swoop of his hand he tore the letter from Marchmont's fingers, and then, with a mighty blow, he struck the captain senseless. He looked at the letter to see that it was all there, then felt wildly in the pocket from which the letter had dropped out. He discovered that the other letter was also gone. Then he observed the disarranged shirt-front where the letter had been concealed, and, quickly thrusting in his hand, he drew the letter out. He tucked them back into his pocket, then glared upon his superior officer.

"I could kill you!" he hissed. "If I only dared to do it!"

His fingers sought the pistol at his hips, but he thrust it back.

"No! no!" nervously. "I should be discovered."

He looked again at the captain.

"I've got to cut out of this," reaching out a hand as if to turn down the lamp.

But a thought stayed the hand, and he walked towards the door. The surgeon was returning, and met him there.

"Captain Marchmont has fallen in a faint," said Crosscut with an excitement that seemed very natural. "He heard the racket and tried to sit up, I think, and tumbled off the cot. I tried to lift him back, but he's pretty heavy, and so I was going after you. I'm glad you're here."

The surgeon gave a quick and anxious look towards the fallen captain.

"I'll send someone to help you!" suggested Crosscut, who was anxious to get away from there. "How's the chase getting on?"

He did not, however, delay to hear any reply, but ran out of the tent, calling to some of the soldiers to go to the surgeon's aid. To others he repeated the question as to how the pursuit was progressing, and learned that so far the fugitives had not been overhauled.

"I'll have to take charge of that, I guess," he declared, and gave orders for his horse and for a detachment of four men.

And when they came he put himself at their head and rode out of the camp.

CHAPTER 8.

Bluecoats Against Firebrands.

Crosscut and his men had hardly gone a mile when they encountered some troopers returning, of whom they made rapid inquiries. Nothing had been seen of the fugitives. The night was too dark for trailing.

This meeting with the troopers suited Crosscut's plans well. There were other troopers still out, and he ordered those who had ridden with him from the camp to return to it, saying he would go on alone. Then, as soon as they had departed, and he felt free to follow his own devices, he changed his course and rode in the direction of what he knew to be the encampment, for that night, of the Rough Riders. He did not doubt that Brace Benson was hastening forward with the Rough Riders at that moment. And, as he rode along, a plan that had dimly come to him took definite shape in his mind.

A trampling of hoofs of ponies and horses suddenly caused him to draw rein and listen.

"Ah, here they are!"

With this exclamation he reined in his horse beside a rock and waited until Colino's Firebrands were close enough to be identified. When sure he was not mistaken he made his presence known, and rode out to intercept them.

"I came out to hurry you up," he explained glibly. "The night isn't going to hold much longer, you know. You've got to get a move on."

"We have come as fast as we could," Benson growled. "Seems to me you're a little reckless, rid'n' out to meet us this way, and running such a big chance of missing us."

He was evidently very displeased and somewhat suspicious. He knew Crosscut well enough to cause him to fear a double deal.

Crosscut's plan was fully formed. He meant to keep quiet about the escape of the prisoners, and have the Rough Riders make a dash on the camp just as if Buffalo Billy and Bob Roundtree were still there. And under cover of this charge of Colino's band he meant to push his way into the camp and kill Captain Marchmont. He reasoned that if he found the captain still unconscious he might by a pistol-shot keep his lips still sealed, so that the secret which Marchmont had become so unfortunately possessed of would still be safe.

"An hour and a half till daylight," he said, looking at his watch by the feeble light of a match. "Take the straightest course, Benson, and ride hard."

Benson was guiding the party, and Lieutenant Crosscut dropped into the ranks by the side of Colino, who rode near the head.

"Everything is all right, is it?" Colino questioned. "I reckon you know just where that tent is?"

"You bet!" Crosscut asserted, his mind on the captain's tent. "I'll look after that, Benson and I. You fellows do the yelling and the shooting, and I'll see that each of the prisoners gets a bullet through his head before the thing is over!"

Hardly a mile had been passed over when, in galloping through a rocky pass, intent only on hurrying forward and never dreaming of danger, they were astonished when a heavy fire broke forth. It was well aimed, and centred on the Rough Riders. Colino's Firebrands had ridden into ambush, and, before they knew what had happened, half of their saddles were emptied, and still the troopers rapidly reloaded and fired their rifles.

The troopers were those who had set out to search for Buffalo Billy and Bob Roundtree. They had become aware of the approach of Colino's men and of their character, and had used the rocky pass as a death-trap for the outlaws.

Juan Colino sought to rally his men to a successful resistance. He drew his pistol and yelled:

"Charge them! At 'em!"

Lieutenant Crosscut imitated Colino's example, and strove to inspire the Rough Riders with courage.

"At them!" cried Colino again and again, firing his revolver as fast as he could work it. "Give it to the dogs!"

But, even as he thus cried, a rifle ball passed through his body, and he fell from his horse, which galloped wildly away.

The Firebrands were worsted and panic-stricken. Brace Benson, too, was killed. The survivors thought only of escape.

Crosscut wheeled his horse and rode towards the other entrance of the pass, and, uninjured, galloped out on to the plain. Half a dozen of the Firebrands rode at his heels, as willing to follow him in flight as in victory.

Once beyond reach of the deadly, belching rifles, Crosscut drew rein and tried to imbue his men with some of his courage. They were too much scared for immediate service, though he was still filling his busy brain with schemes.

"We're alive, men, and still have our liberty! Let us be thankful for that! But we'll not be alive or have liberty long unless we carry out, to some extent, the thing we set out to do."

"And be killed, the rest of us!" was growled into his ears.

"Hear me first, before condemning what I've got to say. We must kill those detectives, or we'll be driven out of the country! Now is our time.

Solid Silver Watches

Send **1/6** only and 6d. for Postage, Packing, etc. Pay balance 1/- Monthly.

Secured on First Payment of only

1/6

Lady's 26/-
Gent's 32/6

To obtain one of our well-jewelled Lever-movement, Hall-marked Solid Silver Wrist or Pocket Watches, send **only 1/6** now and 6d. to cover cost of postage, packing, etc., and the balance of 24/6 for Lady's or 31/- for Gent's by instalments of 1/- or more monthly, as convenient. We send you the Government Stamped Solid Silver Watch, securely packed and registered, by return of post, upon 7 days' free trial. If not perfectly satisfied you may return the watch and have your money refunded in full. A five years' Warranty sent with every watch. Gold Watches, Wrist or Pocket, also Rings, all descriptions and Prices. List Free.

THE STOCKWELL WATCH CO.,

Stockwell Green (E.A.), London, S.W.

A High-Class, Guaranteed

LEVER WATCH FREE

C	J	K	A
E	T	R	B
T	K	E	A
S	O	R	B

The four lines of letters in this square stand for two boys' and two girls' names. We guarantee to send you, **Absolutely Free**, our famous Guaranteed Lever Watch (ladies' or gents') if you send us the correct names; but you must comply with our condition; and promise to show the Watch to your friends, as we wish to advertise our goods. It costs you nothing to try, so send at once. Enclose stamp for reply

London General Supply Assn., Dept. A, 72, Finsbury Pavement, London, E.C.

NOW ON SALE.

Gardening and Allotments for All

A Complete Guide to All-the-Year-Round Garden Work.

Price **6d.** *Of all Newsagents.*

THE GOODSHIP HOUSE,
Crown Court, Chancery Lane, London, W.C. 2.

64-PAGE BOOK ABOUT HERBS AND HOW TO USE THEM, 2d. Send for one. —TRIMNELL, The Herbalist, 144, Richmond Road, Cardiff. Established 1879.

MONEY AND OTHER PRIZES

are offered in Every Number of

TALES FOR LITTLE PEOPLE

1½d. The Favourite Story Book for Young Folk. **1½d.**

Three New Numbers are published on the Second Thursday of each month. Ask for The Aldine Tales for Little People.

THE GOODSHIP HOUSE (The Aldine Publishing Company, Ltd.),
Crown Court, Chancery Lane, London, W.C. 2.

They're held in that tent. We'll never have such an opportunity! And"—he bent forward as if he feared the very winds might take cognizance of what he said—"let us put Captain Marchmont out of the way, too! If he is dead, I'm first in command of the troopers; and you bet if I have charge of them there will be no danger of any of you boys being taken."

Crosscut was feverishly in earnest, and his whispered words trembled on his lips.

"Will you follow me?" he questioned eagerly. "We've got to go somewhere! Let's make a bold stroke!"

"I s'pose Colino's dead?" was questioned.

"No doubt! But I'll be your leader! I'll take the place of Juan Colino. And you know, boys, that you can trust me!"

His words had the effect intended. The Firebrands knew not which way to turn now, since that disaster resulting in the death of Colino and so many of their comrades. They needed a leader, and when a leader rose in the person of Lieutenant Crosscut they gave him their allegiance.

There was probably a feeling of revenge as much as anything else in Crosscut's heart when he placed himself at the head of the decimated band of Firebrands and swooped towards the camp of the troopers.

Daylight was almost at hand. In a little hollow not far from the camp, which he and his men managed to regain without creating any alarm, he placed his men in order and gave them their final instructions. They were to make a desperate charge, screaming and howling like wild Indians, in the midst of which he was to ride to the captain's tent and finish the work which he had before attempted.

The charge of the Rough Riders was as startling and as sudden as the descent of a thunderbolt. The soldiers, though quite unprepared for it, yet met it gallantly.

The troopers who had encountered the Firebrands, and had killed Colino and Benson, had not yet returned, so that the force pitted against the small band of Rough Riders was not great. However, it was able to stem the charge. Three more of the Firebrands fell, their horses darting away, and Lieutenant Crosscut, who had not found it possible to reach the captain's tent, sheered his horse sidewise and sought to make his escape. The cries that arose told him he had been seen and recognised, and his infamy had been made apparent to everyone.

As the scoundrel rode like mad towards the entrance of the valley he swept by the tent occupied by Lizzie Benson, and, seeing her dart out of it in much excitement, he guided his horse close to her. Then he reached over and, grasping her by the waist, lifted her against the horse's side and held her thus as he galloped out of the camp. He heard the rattle of hoofs behind him and glanced anxiously back. Instead of a pursuing trooper, he saw a riderless horse—one of the horses which had been ridden by a Firebrand, who was now dead. He drew the girl up to the saddle and held her there, and then stretched out his other hand and caught the bridle of the riderless horse.

Crosscut was three or four hundred yards from the camp at this time. The troopers had not yet rallied for pursuit, and, knowing he could not go on in that way, he stopped the horses and let the girl drop to the ground, where she fell in a dead faint. He stood for a moment looking down at her, having leaped out of the saddle, and a shade of perplexity and annoyance passed over his face.

Lizzie Benson suddenly recovered consciousness and leaped to her feet, where she stood, reeling and staring at him.

"I had to bring you to save your life!" he declared, quickly stepping towards her. "There's been an awful fight at the camp. The soldiers are nearly all killed, I believe. And we must be going, or we'll be in the same fix."

She looked at him doubtingly, then glanced towards the camp.

"I'd rather go back there. Is Captain Marchment dead?"

"Yes, the captain's dead. You can't go back there. I shan't let you, for I know it would be your death. You'll have to ride that horse!"

"I can't! Oh, I don't want to go!"

Sounds of commotion, which she interpreted as an indication of pursuit, came now distinctly.

"I can't let you have your own choice in the matter!" he declared.

Then, without more ado, he lifted her to the back of the extra horse, and, mounting his own, he held the girl in position and rode slowly along at her side. She was a dead weight for a few moments, and he was beginning to think it would be the part of wisdom to abandon her, when she recovered sufficiently to cling to the saddle and relieve him somewhat, and this enabled them to make more rapid progress.

"That's right!" he said. "Hold fast and I'll get you away from those people."

Lizzie clutched at the saddle as if she hardly knew what she was doing, and the horses sprang down the valley.

There was no organised pursuit, seemingly, and in a little while Lieutenant Crosscut had no more fears on that score, and began to consider what he should do. Up to this moment he had acted almost wholly on impulse, and he now began to feel that he must reason out a course and be guided by it. It required very little reflection to show him that his standing with the troopers was gone. They knew him now for what he was.

What should he do? The Firebrands were killed or dispersed. He was a leader without a follower—literally a fugitive. And this girl? He knew that Captain Marchmont was now acquainted with the facts concerning her.

From these reflections the outlaw lieutenant was recalled by Lizzie Benson, who pulled heavily on the bridle rein and announced, with fierce and unexpected vehemence, that she would go no further.

"You must take me back to the camp!" she panted. "If you don't, I shall go myself."

"I can't let you do so foolish a thing," he protested.

She looked him full in the face and read the duplicity there written. Her fears grew, likewise her desperation; and with a cry of terror she threw herself recklessly from the saddle.

LIFTING THE AMERICA CUP

is the title of one of the exciting numbers of the

DIAMOND LIBRARY

PUBLISHED THIS MONTH. Price **2d.**

The other number is a splendid story of DIXON BRETT,

ENTITLED,

THE GREAT TURF FRAUD.

EACH BOOK IS A LONG COMPLETE NOVEL.

ASK FOR DIAMOND LIBRARY Nos. 122 and 123.

If you have any difficulty in obtaining them, please drop a line to the Publisher, sending 3d. in stamps for each number you require to be sent post free.

THE GOODSHIP HOUSE

(Aldine Publishing Co., Ltd.),

Crown Court, Chancery Lane, W.C. 2.

secure his arms and legs in the folds of the riata.

No sooner had the lieutenant been thus secured than human forms darkened the entrance, and two of the Firebrands, who had escaped from the fight with the troopers, came hurrying in. They halted, and then, taking in the situation, ran forward, fingering their revolvers.

Buffalo Billy put Lizzie Benson behind him and snatched out the little revolver.

"Run!" he whispered. "Run, while I hold them off."

"Don't let them get away!" Crosscut screamed as he saw the girl hurry towards the other entrance.

Buffalo Billy backed away from him, and from the Firebrands, who were coming on, keeping his body interposed between these enemies and the retreating girl. Then, taking advantage of a spur of rock, he darted behind it and ran after Lizzie Benson as fast as his legs would carry him. He was soon brought to a halt by a voice that cried:

"Ho, there! I once knowed a feller that—"

"By the great stone nose of my grand-dad!" Billy exclaimed as he heard the words and saw Bob Roundtree standing before him.

Lizzie Benson had at once fled to Roundtree's side for safety.

"Take that there hoss and git away frum hyar with this bit of calico, will ye!" Roundtree urged, moving towards the entrance. "I'll look after them chaps in there. Crosscut can't git away, fer there's a passel o' soldiers right over the bluff."

He put his fingers to his lips and blew a shrill blast, that had evidently been previously agreed on as a signal, and Billy heard the low commands of some officer and the trampling of horses' feet.

"Slide!" begged Roundtree. "We've got the chaps corralled that's in there. You look out for the girl, an' we'll look out fer them!"

The young scout was already obeying his orders, exceedingly thankful that Roundtree had arrived with a body of troopers at so opportune a time.

Rio Grande Rob had fallen in with the troopers who were pursuing the small remnant of Firebrands. Only a few moments before meeting them he had read the message left for him by Buffalo Billy in the cleft stick, and had set out to follow. Then he had offered his services as guide to the troopers, and had led them swiftly along the plain trail which his youthful pard had left. From these troopers Roundtree had learned of the remarkable occurrences known to the reader, for Captain Marchmont had quite recovered from the effects of the cowardly blow dealt him by Lieutenant Crosscut and had made public the latter's treasonable perfidy and dastardly course of action.

Crosscut and the two Firebrands were attacked in the rock tunnel. They made a fight there, and one of them fell, when Crosscut and the other surrendered.

* * * * *

It was discovered afterwards that border bandits, who had no connection with the Texas Firebrands, had burned Brace Benson's house, and that they did it to gain possession of the money which they had somehow found out was there.

* * * * *

The meeting between Marchmont and his daughter, so long separated, was very touching. In the gallant captain Bessie found a father of whom she could be justly proud.

As for Buffalo Billy and Bob Roundtree, they were thanked and liberally rewarded by the authorities for the destruction of the band of Rough Riders, and for running down and bringing to merited punishment that most detestable of scoundrels, Lieutenant Crosscut.

THE END.

Two other fine numbers of the BUFFALO BILL LIBRARY are published with this book:

292. The Death-Shot Wizard

293. Colorado Claude's Claim

Three new stories are issued each month. Ask your newsagent to order them for you. Tell him you want the ALDINE BUFFALO BILLS.

CHOOSE YOUR CAREER

Yes; CHOOSE your career! MAKE your career; that is the only way to get on. It's no use folding your hands and waiting. Nothing comes in the world of work to him who waits except a tombstone. The men and boys who make their way who succeed, who win and hold good positions, are those who have a definite object, and who, whatever happens, determinedly push and fight to get there. If you are unable to enlist, what is your aim? Read this list of

POSITIONS FOR WHICH THE I.C.S. QUALIFY STUDENTS.

Advertisement Writer	**Designer**	**Mechanical Engineer**
Architect	**Draughtsman**	**Mining Engineer**
Book-keeper	**Electrical Engineer**	**Motor Engineer**
Cabinet Maker	**Furniture Maker**	**Salesman**
Chauffeur	**Gas-Power Engineer**	**Steam Engineer**
Commercial Traveller	**Marine Engineer**	**Wireless Operator**

If you will write to us we will send you full particulars of the training the International Correspondence Schools will give you to qualify you for any of the above positions. Please name which position you are in or want to be in, even if it is not given above. These Schools give a thorough, practical and up-to-date training; not a mere theoretical, but a practical training by practical men for ambitious youths and men. Address:—

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS, LIMITED,

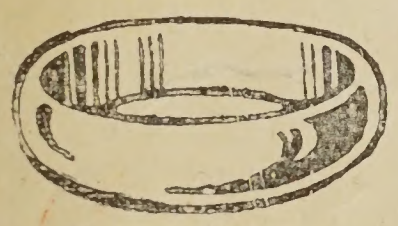
75p, International Buildings, Kingsway, London, W.C

(To avoid delay please use our full address.)

SOLID GOLD RINGS

Secured on first Payment of Only 1/6

Send 1/6 only and 6d. for Postage, Packing, etc. Pay balance 1/- Monthly until 25/- is paid.



22 carat Wedding.

18 carat Keeper.

18 carat Signet various designs.

To obtain any one of these Hall-marked Solid Gold Rings send only 1/6 now and 6d. to cover cost of postage, packing, &c., and the balance of 23/6 by instalments of 1/- or more monthly as convenient. We send you the Government Stamped Solid Gold Ring, securely packed and registered by return of post. I not perfectly satisfied you may return the Ring and have your money refunded in full. We make no inquiries. Cut hole in piece of card or write for Size Card and Catalogue Free. Rings, also Watches, Chains, &c., all qualities.

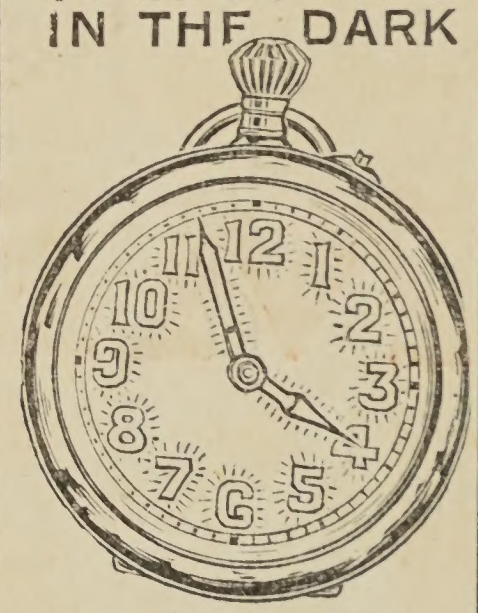
EMPIRE RING CO. CLEMENT'S AVE. (W.P.) CLAPHAM

A REAL SWISS LEVER

WATCH FREE!

LUMINOUS DIAL TO SHOW TIME IN THE DARK

D — B — — N	
DU — — EE	
L — N — ON	
EX — — ER	



In this puzzle you see four lines of letters. Fill in the missing letters so that each line spells a well-known town in the British Isles. A magnificent Watch (guaranteed 5 years) will be sent free of charge to readers of this book who solve this puzzle and conform to our one condition. It costs you nothing to try. Send your answer, together with stamp, that we may send you result. All failing to do this will be disqualified.

SEND NOW!

UNIVERSAL TRADING CO. (4 Dept.), 89, Cornwallis Rd., London, N. 19.

Any Boy can build this Bridge with Meccano

IT is made with strong, shining steel Meccano parts. All you have to do is to bolt them together. The transporter is worked by the fine little Meccano motor which you see at the foot. It is only one of the hundreds of splendid working models, Cranes, Towers, Looms, Motors, Aeroplanes, which you can build the moment you get your Outfit

A big illustrated Book of Instructions is included in every Outfit and tells you everything.

Get your Meccano and enjoy this wonderful hobby to-day.

MECCANO

Engineering for Boys

FREE—Superb Book

"MECCANO - LAND"

An absorbing story of a sunny country inhabited only by happy boys. A copy will be posted to you when you have shown this advertisement to three chums, and sent us their names and addresses with your own. Put No. 66 after your name for reference. No boy ought to miss this fine booklet.

Meccano Prices

No. 0 Outfit 6 =	No. 3 Outfit 30 =
No. 1 Outfit 10 =	No. 4 Outfit 50 =
No. 2 Outfit 20 =	No. 5 Outfit 70 =

No. 5 Presentation Outfit in Oak Cabinet 100 =

No. 6 Presentation Outfit in Oak Cabinet 180 =

Meccano Ltd: Binns Road: Liverpool

Published by the Proprietors, The ALDINE PUBLISHING CO., LD., Crown Court, Chancery Lane, London, W.C. 2, and Printed by HAZELL, WATSON & VINEY, LD., Kirby Street, Hatton Garden London E.C. 1.
Agents for the Colonies (Australia and Canada), Gordon & Gotch, London; for Canada, the Imperial News Co., Ltd., London; for South Africa, W. Dawson & Sons, Ltd., London, and the Central News Agency, Ltd.